

Ancient and modern: democracy in Athens and Britain

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Aristotle said 'some people think that there is only one kind of democracy, but this is not true'. Both ancient Athens and modern-day Britain feature to some degree the 'rule of the people', but the interpretations of this ideal differ radically and in many ways. In essence, however, the 'two principles that are generally regarded as characteristic of democracy: the absolute sovereignty of the masses and individual liberty', form the theoretical basis for both systems of government.

Democracy – direct or representative?

In Athens, popular government manifested itself as a direct democracy, where all citizens had the right to attend the assembly and to have their voices heard on any subject, from foreign policy (whether to declare war) to home policy (granting citizenship). Each and every citizen, from the most educated aristocrat to the lowliest menial worker, had a direct involvement in the running of the civil government, and all were deemed worthy of this responsibility. This system was therefore subject to criticisms regarding the 'wanton brutality of the rabble', a feature famously observed in the execution of the generals involved in the failure to recover the dead after the sea battle at Arginousae.

British democracy is not like this. British democracy is representative, and hence closer to what an Athenian would see as oligarchy. Parliament is a body composed of hundreds, rather than millions of citizens, but those hundreds speaks for the millions. Only rarely is a referendum carried out and, when it is, it is instigated by parliament and there is no obligation on the government to pay it any heed. If a representative of the people in modern day Britain does something against the people's wishes, they can do nothing about it until the next election, when they may remove that person from power, but this will bring them no closer to a direct say in the governance of the body politic.

Stakeholder politics

In Athens, there was a deliberative body known as the *boule*. In many ways this council resembled the Houses of Parliament, as its five hundred members represented all the tribes and demes, and managed much of the day-to-day administration of the state. The *boule* could not, however pass legislation on its own authority, it merely arranged the agenda for the Assembly. Also, its members were chosen by lot and could not serve for more than two years, largely preventing the power-seeking and long term power-holding associated with modern politics.

Clearly there is a disparity between the role of the citizen in the democracies of ancient Athens and modern Britain, and perhaps the most potent indicator of this is a semantic one. In Athens, every citizen was a *polites* as well as a farmer or carpenter or merchant and was expected to take part in the democratic process. Anyone who did not was called an *idiotes*, from which comes the word 'idiot'. Today, politics is a career in its own right and the term 'politician' is reserved for those who devote themselves to it professionally, though still through popular election. This aspect of British democracy was summed up by Richard Price, in three rights: 'To choose our own governors; to cashier

them for misconduct; to frame a government for ourselves'.

Despite these three rights, whereas Aristotle wrote that 'man is by nature a political animal', on the one day in five years when the British people as a whole is invited to participate in their political system, only 61.4% of registered voters exercise their power to elect their own government. Contrast this with Pericles' depiction of 'him who takes no part in these duties, not as unambitious, but as useless'. Not only was ancient democracy far more direct and demanding of active involvement, but it was an integral part of the day-to-day workings of most citizens, and helped define the very notion of what a citizen was.

Votes for all?

One way in which British democracy could be deemed superior to that of Athens is that its franchise is much wider. In Britain today the right to vote is extended to all citizens above the age of 18, regardless of gender, faith, race, or parentage, but in Athens, to vote, one had to be a male citizen above the age of 18, and above the age of 30 to hold certain offices. Today, maxims such as 'Universal Male Suffrage' and 'One Man, One Vote' jar uncomfortably against modern egalitarian values. In Athens, however, the notion of women having any participation in the voting system whatsoever was so fantastic and laughable that Aristophanes made it the subject of one of his comedies, *Assembly-Women*, an oxymoronic title to Athenian ears.

Citizenship, even among adult male residents of Athens, was also quite a narrow concept. While in modern-day Britain there may be no suffrage for illegal aliens, in Athens, even a metic, a resident alien, who may even have been born in Athens and who was burdened with the non-political duties of a citizen, such as military service and tax, would experience what Aristotle terms 'detachment from the political partnership'. From Pericles' citizenship law of 451/0 B.C. onwards, one needed citizen parentage on both sides to qualify as a politically active citizen.

Furthermore, the legislative recognition of the immorality of slavery coincides with the first step towards what we now see as democracy in Britain. In Athens, however, slavery was very much a part of society and slaves were not even viewed as human beings. Aristotle sums up such views when talking about character in literature and reminding his readers that, although woman and slave characters may be 'good', 'it may be said that a woman is an inferior thing and a slave beneath consideration'.

The least of evils

Despite these differences, both systems had as their foundation stones the belief that the sovereignty of the people is far preferable to either oligarchy, 'rule of the few', or autocracy, 'rule of one'. Churchill encapsulated this idea in the dictum, 'Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time'. Similarly, Herodotus makes the Persian Otanes, arguing for popular government, say 'Monarchy is neither pleasant nor good', while Euripides has Theseus counter a Theban herald's attack on democracy with the statement, 'Nothing is more hostile to a city than a despot'. This aversion to despotism can be traced

to the origins of democracy in both its ancient and modern forms: Cleisthenes' democratic reforms followed the 'tyrannicide' of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, who killed the tyrant Hippias, while the timeline of democracy in Britain features both the execution of Charles I and the deposition of James II. Both Athens' and Britain's abhorrence of despotism clearly form the basis of their insistence on self-government.

Another central tenet of democracy common to both versions is the liberality and tolerance lauded by its supporters and vilified by its critics. Pericles boasted that 'at Athens we live exactly as we please', while Plato attacked this very aspect of democracy, branding it as 'anarchic and motley, assigning a kind of equality indiscriminately to equals and unequals alike'! The liberality of Athenian society is attested to in, among other things, the fact that, while metics – be they 'Lydians, Phrygians, Syrians, or barbarians of all sorts', as Xenophon put it – could not vote, they were free to participate in the social and economic aspects of civil life. Meanwhile, in Britain, all races and lifestyles, as long as they do not infringe the rights and liberties of others, are tolerated.

I hate what you say, but...

Ironically, what allowed the likes of Plato and Aristotle to criticise democracy was one of its most central pillars: freedom of speech. One need only look at Pericles' Funeral Speech to see how integral this concept is: 'instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all'. This right was considered so important that Euripides' Polynices names the thing he misses most as an exile as the fact that 'he cannot speak his mind'. That irony is prevalent in Britain today, and has been a feature of British political thought at least since John Stuart Mill defined and advocated absolute freedom of speech.

That this principle existed in practice is borne out by an examination of the life of Aristophanes, who was allowed to write material which would these days be bordering on the libellous about a man so powerful in the city that no actor dared to play him: Cleon. Indeed, when Cleon filed a lawsuit against him, Aristophanes merely increased the number of *ad hominem* attacks. While there were instances of this freedom being denied, as in the case of Socrates' execution, on the whole everyone in Athens had the right to say whatever they wanted, particularly in the Assembly, where the herald would, as Aeschines writes, 'repeat again and again the invitation "Who wishes to address the Assembly?"'; similarly in Britain, with a free press and few restrictions on what can be said, freedom of expression is enshrined as an integral democratic principle.

A shared ideal

Democracy is founded on the belief that the ordinary people are best capable of judging for themselves what is in their own and the state's best interests, better even than a 'philosopher-king'. Pericles epitomises this idea, that the general populace can be entrusted with the running of the government, with assurance that 'our ordinary citizens are still fair judges of public matters'. This is echoed in British politics by Lord Acton, who maintained that 'it is easier to find people fit to govern themselves than people to govern others. Every man is the best, the most responsible, judge of his own advantage'. Although there are many differences in the manner in which the *demos* wields its *kratos* in the two systems, both an Athenian and a British democrat, however naïvely, trust in the inborn intelligence of all humans to make political decisions of their own accord, rather than having a benevolent dictator do so on their behalf, and it is this that led to and maintained the rule of the people in Athens and continues to do so in Britain.

Leo Davidson is the winner of this year's Gladstone Essay Prize with this essay on 'How did Athenian democracy work? And how does it compare with that of Britain in the 21st century?'